

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7546

INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

CINCPAC

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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, CE

SUBJ: THE ELECTION SCENE: FOUR WEEKS TO GO

REF: (A) COLOMBO 1934 (NOTAL); (B) COLOMBO 1667 (NOTAL);
(C) COLOMBO 1916

1. SUMMARY. WITH FOUR WEEKS TO GO BEFORE GENERAL ELECTIONS, CANDIDATES ARE CRISSCROSSING THE ISLAND GIVING SPEECHES DUTIFULLY REPORTED BY THE PRESS. BUT THERE IS NO PARTICULAR UPLIFTING OR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY TO THE POLITICAL DIALOGUE, WHICH HAS FOLLOWED EXPECTED LINES TO THE EXTENT THAT, EXCEPT AMONG STRONG PARTISANS, BOREDOM RATHER THAN INSPIRATION APPEARS TO BE THE PREVAILING MOOD. THE OPPOSITION UNITED NATIONAL PARTY IS STILL THE FAVORITE TO GAIN AT LEAST A PLURALITY, BUT MOST PREDICTION ARE ADMITTEDLY ONLY GUESSES. THE UNP'S ANTI-SOVIET CAMPAIGN APPEARS TO HAVE ABATED AND OTHER FOREIGN CONCERNS HAVE NOT PLAYED A PROMINENT PART IN THE ELECTIONEERING.
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COMMUNAL AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE, INCLUDING DEATHS, HAVE MARRED THE CAMPAIGN BUT THE LABOR CHALLENGES TO THE GOVERNMENT HAVE DIED DOWN. END SUMMARY.

2. FOUR WEEKS BEFORE THE ELECTION, THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN SEEMS NOT TO HAVE CAUGHT THE IMAGINATION OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC, DESPITE THE COMPLETE ABSENCE OF ANY OTHER DOMESTIC NEWS. CAN-

DIDATES ARE ON THE HUSTINGS IN EARNEST BUT ARE NOT SAYING MUCH THAT IS NOVEL OR UNANTICIPATED. THEY APPEAR TO BE GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS EVEN WHILE CONVINCED THAT MOST VOTERS HAVE ALREADY MADE UP THEIR MINDS ONE WAY OR THE OTHER. MOST IMPARTIAL OBSERVERS AGREE THAT THERE IS AN ENORMOUS DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PRESENT STATE OF AFFAIRS, BUT NO ONE CAN BE QUITE SURE HOW THAT UNHAPPINESS WILL MANIFEST ITSELF. UNP LEADERS ARE PUBLICLY CONFIDENT OF VICTORY ALTHOUGH THEY NO LONGER PONTIFICATE ON "WHEN WE COME TO POWER." THE UNITED LEFT FRONT AND ETERNALLY HOPEFUL INDEPENDENTS THINK THAT FRUSTRATION WITH BOTH MAJOR PARTIES WILL THROW THE VOTES THEIR WAY. (MORE INDICATIVE OF THEIR PRIVATE AND MORE PESSIMISTIC VIEWS, PERHAPS, IS THE LSSP DECISION TO PUT ALL ITS CANDIDATES INTO YATIYANTOTA ONE DAY THIS WEEK TO HELP THE RE-ELECTION EFFORTS OF PARTY LEADER N.M. PERERA.) ELECTION GUESSES FROM NONPARTISAN SOURCES (RARE AS THEY ARE) TEND TOWARD THE UNP GETTING AT LEAST A PLURALITY OF THE SEATS, IF NOT MORE. THE INDEPENDENT DAVASA GROUP OF PAPERS IS RUNNING A "PICK THE WINNERS" CONTEST TO GET A ROUGH AND ADMITTEDLY UNSCIENTIFIC FIX ON PUBLIC OPINION. OF THE INITIAL 2000 ENTRANTS, 90 PERCENT ARE PREDICTING A UNP VICTORY.

3. NOW THAT THE CAMPAIGN HAS FORMALLY BEGUN, THE CANDIDATES ARE UNDER MORE RESTRAINTS THAN BEFORE THE DISSOLUTION OF THE ASSEMBLY. SRI LANKA'S STRICT ELECTION LAWS BAR ANY MORE OF SUCH POLITICAL TACTICS AS THE GRANTING OF PATRONAGE JOBS BY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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M.P.'S (NOW SCRUPULOUSLY REFERRED TO AS EX-M.P.'S) AND EVEN THE PASTING OF ELECTION POSTERS ON WALLS. TO AVOID OVERT PARTISANSHIP, GOVERNMENT RADIO NOW VIRTUALLY IGNORES THE ENTIRE ELECTION CAMPAIGN (AND EVEN THE PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECHES), TRUMPETING INSTEAD OFFICIAL STATISTICS OF PRODUCTION GAINS AND STATE CORPORATION PROFITS. THE PRESS, BY CONTRAST, IS FULL OF THE SPEECHES OF ALL POLITICAL LEADERS, BLANDED ACCORDING TO THE LEANINGS OF THE OWNERSHIP. EVEN GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED LAKE HOUSE GIVES PROMINENT COVERAGE TO THE OPPOSITION, WHILE REVEALING ITS PREFERENCES IN SHARPLY-WORDED ANTI-UNP COLUMNS AND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR. THE WEAK TIMES GROUP IS "INDEPENDENT SLFP": IT BOOSTS THE CAMPAIGN OF THE PM'S SON ANURA BUT IS NOT ABOVE SLIPPING A KNIFE INTO SLFP MINISTERS WITH WHOM IT DISAGREES. THE ONCE-BANNED AND NOW-WIDELY READ DAVASA/SUN GROUP IS DOING THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE REPORTING, WHILE TAKING A GENERALLY ANTI-GOVERNMENT STANCE IN ITS EDITORIAL COLUMNS.

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4. THE ISSUES BEING DISCUSSED FROM THE PUBLIC PLATFORMS WILL PROBABLY NOT CHANGE MANY MINDS. THE SLFP TALKS OF ITS ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PAST SEVEN YEARS -- LAND REFORMS, IRRIGATION DEVELOPMENT, IMPORT SUBSTITUTION, RURAL ELECTRIFICATION, AND A NEW REPUBLICAN CONSTITUTION -- AND ASKS FOR MORE TIME TO CONSOLIDATE THESE GAINS. THE UNP ARGUES, IN EFFECT, "YOU NEVER HAD IT SO BAD" AND PROMISES TO BRING ECONOMIC RATIONALITY AND PUBLIC MORALITY BACK TO SRI LANKA. ONE UNEXPECTED TWIST, INTRODUCED BY THE UNP, HAS BEEN A VIRULENT ANTI-SOVIET CAMPAIGN WHICH NOW APPEARS TO HAVE ABATED. PROMPTED BY ANTI-UNP ARTICLES APPEARING IN THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED LAKE HOUSE PRESS AND AUTHORED BY AN EMPLOYEE OF THE SOVIET PRESS OFFICE, THE CAMPAIGN INCLUDED A LETTER OF COMPLAINT FROM UNP LEADER J. R. JAYEWARDENE TO LEONID BREZHNEV (REF A). BY CONTRAST, ANTI-U.S. THEMES HAVE SO FAR BEEN MUTED, ALTHOUGH AN UNCLE SAM-LIKE FIGURE WILL OCCASIONALLY APPEAR IN THE COMMUNIST PRESS, MANIPULATING EITHER J. R. ("YANKEE DICKIE") OR THE PRIME MINISTER, AND SEVERAL SLFP CANDIDATES HAVE MADE ALMOST AUTOMATIC AND PERFUNCTORY REFERENCES TO "CIA ACTIVITIES" IN
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PLATFORM APPEARANCES.

5. IN PUBLISHED REPORTS OF CANDIDATES' SPEECHES AROUND THE ISLAND, THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT FOREIGN AFFAIRS ARE MUCH

OF AN ISSUE IN THE CAMPAIGN,ALTHOUGH AN OCCASIONAL UNP CANDIDATE WILL TAKE THE PM TO TASK FOR HER TRIPS AND CONFERENCES AS LEADING TO NEGLECT OF MORE IMPORTANT DOMESTIC PROBLEMS. ONE EXCEPTION --- THE BRIEF UNP ANTI-SOVIET CAMPAIGN --- WAS FOUGHT MAINLY IN THE PRESS RATHER THAN ON THE STUMP. THE ISSUE-HUNGRY LEFT HAS ATTEMPTED TO SEIZE ON A FREE PORT/EXPORT PROCESSING ZONE PLANK IN THE UNP MANIFESTO AS AN EXAMPLE OF CAPITALIST GIVE-AWAY TO THE IMPERIALISTS AND MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS, BUT SINCE THE SLFP HAS ALSO FAVORED FREE TRADE ZONES IN THE PAST, THE ISSUE DOES NOT APPLY BETWEEN THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES. SURPRISINGLY, THE PRIME MINISTER HAS RESISTED THE TEMPTATION TO USE HER SUCCESSFUL HOSTING OF THE 1976 NON-ALIGNED CONFERENCE AS A CAMPAIGN ISSUE; PERHAPS SHE KNOWS HER MOSTLY-RURAL CONSTITUENTS TOO WELL TO EXPECT THAT THE "LEADERSHIP OF THE THIR WORLD" HAS MUCH APPEAL FOR THEM.

6. DESPITE THE GENERAL APATHY OF THE PUBLIC TO THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN, AMONG STRONG UNP AND SLFP PARTISANS FEELINGS ARE RUNNING HIGH AND HAVE HAD VIOLENT CONSEQUENCES. COMMUNAL PASSIONS HAVE BEEN AROUSED, RESULTING IN THE DEATH IN MAY OF A TAMIL PLANTATION WORKER (KILLED BY POLICE FIRING - REF B), AND A SERIOUS RIOT IN TRINCOMALEE JUNE 4-5 IN WHICH 6-10 PEOPLE DIED AFTER TAMIL LEADER S.J.V. CHELVANAYAKAM'S ASHES WERE CARRIED THROUGH TOWN. DIRECT UNP-SLFP CLASHES HAVE RESULTED IN THE DEATH OF THE BATTICALOA UNP CANDIDATE'S BROTHER THIS MONTH AND A UNP VILLAGE LEVEL WORKER IN MATARA IN MARCH, BESIDES NUMEROUS BRAWLS.

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7. THE LABOR TROUBLES WHICH THREATENED TO UPSET THE PRE-ELECTION SOCIAL EQUILIBRIUM (REF C) HAVE DIED DOWN FOR THE MOMENT. WITH AN ADROIT COMBINATION OF CONCESSIONS WHERE NECESSARY (PARTICULARLY WITH STRIKING PHYSICIANS) AND A HARD LINE WHERE POSSIBLE (WITH RAILWAY WORKERS), THE CARETAKER GOVERNMENT HAS DEFUSED THE SITUATION. IT WAS AIDED BY THE QUIET SUPPORT OF THE UNP WHICH FEARS NOTHING SO MUCH AS GIVING THE GOVERNMENT A PRETEXT TO POSTPONE THE ELECTIONS. THE ONLY CLOUD ON THE HORIZON IS A THREAT BY COMMERICAL BANK EMPLOYEES TO STRIKE ON JUNE 28 IF CERTAIN OF THEIR DEMANDS ARE NOT MET.

8. AS IN ANY ELECTION, POCKETBOOK CONCERNS WEIGH HEAVILY WITH THE VOTERS. IN THIS REGARD, THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO STOCK THE SHELVES OF COOPERATIVES WITH A SURFEIT OF CHEAP FOODSTUFFS AND CONSUMER NECESSITIES HAVE BEEN ONLY PARTIALLY SUCCESSFUL. THERE IS STILL A QUEUE OF SHIPS OUTSIDE THE HARBOR, BEARING WITNESS TO THE SURGE OF UNCOORDINATED IMPORTS. MATCHES ARE AMONG THE LATEST ITEMS TO BE IMPORTED AFTER PRICE-

CONTROLLED LOCAL SUPPLIES WENT UNDERGROUND; SOAP IS STILL
OFF THE SHELVES NINE MONTHS AFTER THE END OF THE LEVEL BROTHERS
STRIKE. HEAVY RAINS OVER THE PAST TWO MONTHS HAVE TAKEN THEIR
TOLL ON THE PRICES OF VEGETABLES AND FISH, SOME OF WHICH ARE
NOW VIRTUALLY LUXURY ITEMS. ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN,
RICE IS FREELY AVAILABLE AND RELATIVELY CHEAP AS IT HAS NOT
ALWAYS BEEN IN PAST YEARS.
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